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AUTHOR Flynn, R. Thomas
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ABSTRACT

Community colleges must develop a more adequate information base in order to (1) present an accurate image to the community in terms of the quality of the education available and the value of a degree, and (2) provide the kinds of information that will enable prospective students to decide whether to attend the institution. This paper describes Monroe Community College's attempt to develop a more adequate "educational prospectus" (all information which the institution uses to inform prospective students about itself). In order to determine and prioritize the information needs of the community, a survey instrument was developed which permitted various groups to analyze the importance of 90 types of information about the college. Those surveyed included: high school seniors, high school guidance counselors, parents of high school seniors, and current college students, alumni, faculty, and administrators. The completed surveys were analyzed to determine the importance ranking of various types of information, and were further analyzed for various demographic groupings of respondents. On the basis of survey results, an education prospectus for Monroe Community College was developed which included seven 10-15 minute slide tape cassette programs, intended to complement the more usual printed college information. (NHM)

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DEVELOPING THE EDUCATIONAL PROSPECTUS AT AN URBAN COMMUNITY COLLEGE

R. Thomas Flynn
Vice-President, Student Affairs
Monroe Community College
Rochester, New York 14623

JC 760 299

DEVELOPING THE EDUCATIONAL PROSPECTUS FOR AN URBAN COMMUNITY COLLEGE

I am going to take a few minutes to share with you some information on student consumerism in higher education and the development of an Educational Prospectus at a community college. I recognize that many of you are from four-year institutions but I believe you will find the comments relevant.

Many community colleges located in high population areas have achieved rapid growth during the past 10-15 years. During such growth, many assumptions regarding the information needs of the community about the colleges have been made based upon the questions asked most frequently by members of the community. However, these assumptions most likely have not produced a coordinated public information program that adequately explains to the community the total concept behind these emerging institutions.

Few community colleges can claim that they have not experienced image problems within their communities. This may be especially true in a sophisticated urban setting where the role of the community college is not clearly understood, and where four-year colleges and universities often receive more attention than their two-year counterparts. My institution, Monroe Community College, is a prime example of such a situation. Our image problem is compounded by the fact that 12 four-year colleges, including the highly respected University of Rochester and Rochester Institute of Technology, are located within a 15-mile radius of our own campus.

Due to such factors, community colleges are compelled to re-examine the information they provide to the community. Such a re-examination requires a great deal of time, effort and expense as a more adequate information base is

established. This base must serve a dual function:

1) It has to present an accurate image of the college to the community in terms of the quality of the education available and the value of a degree; and
2) It has to provide the kinds of information that will benefit prospective students in deciding whether or not to attend the institution.

A DEFINITE NEED MUST BE DETERMINED

It must be agreed that a college's responsibility to its students does not begin after acceptance but instead when those individuals are prospective students first interested in the institution. The prospective students have the right to assume that the information presented by the college is accurate and complete. This entails presenting the college as it really is, its weaknesses as well as its strengths. Besides assisting the prospective student in determining whether the college matches his interest, abilities and career goals, the information should also point out possible reasons, if any, for his not attending the institution. Some information may be considered negative by some and positive by others.

The new wave of student and educational consumerism has made us even more aware of our responsibility to present adequate and complete information. If we do not, we may find ourselves in legal challenges for not fulfilling claims made in recruiting or in publicizing particular programs, courses and services. A quick review reveals that students are challenging, through the courts, inadequate course descriptions, filing academic grievances against instructors and attacking other academic and service claims made by various institutions. Two such examples are:

1. Six students at George Washington University Medical School sued the college for alleged breach of contract. They said that the school catalog promised that tuition increases would averag about $200 a year but instead were higher.
2. A suit at Queensborough Community College also involved the school catalog. Students in the Nursing Program were told they were ineligible for their final Nursing course because they failed to maintain a C-minus average; this requirement was not mentioned in the catalog.

Regardless of the outcome of such cases, this is evidence that institutions must provide as accurate information as possible and may very well be held liable if they do not.

We must also consider that students are well aware today that many college graduates are out of work and many are employed in fields other than those for which they were prepared. Prospective students have a right to know not only what their chances are for successfully completing their degree, but also how their degree will benefit them once they leave the institution. Such information should be provided by the institution in its early information to prospective students.

Most community colleges were created to meet a wide variety of post-secondary educational needs and to provide an opportunity for higher education to a broad segment of the community. Many informational problems in serving prospective students are a direct result of these objectives. The problems include serving many first generation college students who lack an understanding of the demands of college in terms of study time, student responsibility for

learning and other commitments. Also, the fact that two-year colleges offer numerous specialized career programs as well as various transfer programs invites other unique problems of program or career choice. The failure of colleges to adequately inform students of the rigors of college life and the nature and demands of particular programs contributes, at least in part, to the frequency of curriculum changes, withdrawals and thus, disappointments.

Following are a few of the problems we have found at Monroe Community College due to our inadequate information base:

1. The "open-door policy" is not understood by current students, let alone prospective students or other members of the community. An obvious misconception is that because any high school graduate can be accepted into the college, he is also eligible for any program.
2. There is an inaccurate image of the college because the quality and diversity of the different educational programs are not widely known.
3. Current information does not adequately reflect the diversity of the student body and their ability levels which lead many members of the community to assume that M.C.C. students are drop-outs from other colleges or students who could not qualify for four-year schools.
4. Current information does not adequately explode the myth that only recent high school graduates can succeed in college.
5. Prospective students are not adequately informed regarding the transferability of their credits to four-year institutions, or their opportunities for employment once they have graduated.

After reviewing such problems, we knew changes had to be made.

NEED FOR A MULTI-FACETED INFORMATIONAL APPROACH

Like most community colleges, we have a mandate to provide higher education

to a broad segment of the community. We need to effectively communicate with a prospective student population which includes large numbers of veterans, blacks, Spanish-speaking, senior citizens and handicapped individuals. Our students come from inner-city, suburban, rural, private and parochial high schools. Such a diverse population requires that diverse approaches be used to satisfy information needs. Therefore, our early objective was to determine the necessary mediums for presenting this information to these different populations. We knew that we needed a comprehensive information package where each part reinforces and compliments the others.

While most colleges, including ours, have relied upon the college catalog and departmental brochures to present information to prospective students, a few have used other approaches such as college viewbooks, mini-catalogs, student handbooks and various programmatic pamphlets. Although this represents variations of presenting the information, it is still through primarily one medium--that being the printed word. Our investigation led us to believe that an audio-visual presentation in the form of slide tape cassettes can be an effective addition to the information package. Such cassettes would make important information readily accessible to a student population which varies widely in ability and is frequently more visually than verbally oriented. If we define our Educational Prospectus as all information which the institution uses to inform prospective students about itself, then the development of the Educational Prospectus first requires that the College develop a means by which these prospective students can identify their information needs. To accomplish this, we developed a survey instrument which permitted various groups to prioritize these needs. We surveyed high school seniors, high school guidance counselors, parents of high school seniors and current college students, alumni, faculty and administrators.

Through preliminary investigation, we identified questions which had to be examined. The survey was then designed to permit the various groups to identify the types of information they desired regarding the College. From a list of questions about the College which prospective students had asked during the preliminary investigation, 90 questions were included on the survey. They included:

1. What is likely to happen to me, if I come to your institution?
2. What are my chances of finding a job locally, if I enroll in a career program?
3. Will all of my courses transfer to a four-year institution?
4. Who attends the College?
5. Is the College merely an extension of high school?
6. How do students and graduates rate the quality of the faculty?
7. Can students succeed at the College, if they are working full-time, etc?

Each person surveyed was asked to rate the importance (high, medium, low) of the information called for by each question. Space was also provided for respondents to write in additional information which they considered important.

ANALYZING SURVEY RESULTS

The completed surveys were then analyzed by computer to determine the ranking of importance of the types of information considered. The survey was also designed to collect demographic data about the respondents which permitted us to analyze the responses by various groupings, such as sex, ethnic group, age, etc.

After analyzing the results of the survey, we were further convinced that to meet the information needs of our prospective student population, the

Educational Prospectus should include a slide tape cassette presentation supporting other written material.

THE SLIDE TAPE CASSETTE PROGRAMS

Therefore, we decided to develop seven 10-15 minute slide tape cassette programs. One program would present an overview of the college experience, covering such topics as admissions requirements, costs and financial aid, student population, social life and transferability. The other programs would describe in depth various related career and transfer programs. Each presentation would consist of professional narrations, photos and recorded comments of college students presenting information which had been identified by the survey as "high importance".

It was further decided that the distribution of the slide tape cassette programs would include all area high schools, local libraries, colleges and many industries. Copies of the slide tape cassette programs would also be available in various locations at the college to be used by current students as well as by prospective students who visit the college.

CONCLUSION

In closing, I want to add that, regardless of your approach, it is ultimately important that all colleges do more to provide full disclosure of appropriate information in order to assist prospective students in making the right choices. It is our opinion that they need this more today than possibly ever before.

Thank you.

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